

# The humanization of gods and kings in renaissance art

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The Renaissance period of history was one that provided profound changes in the way in which people viewed traditional modes and models of thought, self-awareness, science, religion and art. What is interesting is the in the art of the Renaissance period is that the pulse of the time period is clearly reflected because much that was not explicitly stated in other modes is clear in the subtext of the artwork as subtext often appears below the radar of, for lack of a better term, censors of the period.

When Galileo announced that the earth revolved around the sun and that the commonly held belief that the sun revolved around the earth was a fallacy, he was promptly thrown in jail. Therein lies one of the most forgotten aspects of the revolution of the Renaissance: much of what has become accepted in today's day and age that derived from the brilliance of the Renaissance thinkers was not exactly welcomed by the traditionalists of the day. However, if there was a common flaw present within the realm of traditionalists it would be the fact that traditionalists are not known for possessing the common faculty of creativity.

As such, much of the anti-traditionalist viewpoints of the Renaissance are present within the artwork of the Renaissance period and this anti-traditionalist, anti-classical approach found in the artwork are revealed upon closer examination of said artwork. Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew* looks somewhat benign on the surface, but its underlying subtext betrays a profound departure from what is commonly considered the imagery of artistic representation of gods and kings.

In order to understand this radical departure one must examine what was the common classical imagery of religious figures in the traditional era. That <https://assignbuster.com/the-humanization-of-gods-and-kings-in-renaissance-art/>

is to say, the traditional and classic imagery of religious figures was primarily one of idealization. The figures presented in Greek sculpture, for example, were generally depicted as flawless entities. The imagery was devoid of imperfections and it was clear that those represented and displayed in the artwork were presented as being 'otherworldly' and definitely not representative of the average person.

(This lack of imperfection in the imagery of the gods is where the colloquialism "a body like a Greek God" derives) Now, this imagery of perfection was not designed in such a matter to be deceptive. Rather, it was done in such a way because there needed to be a distinct representative difference between Gods and Kings vs. plebian populace members. To a great extent, this was done in order to facilitate a belief in the gods. While there are many myths and legends found in the tales of the Greek gods, much of what is found in these tales was completely absent from the average daily life of the Greeks.

The entirety of their religion was based on the premise of the existence of constant interference in the lives of 'regular' by mythic creatures, deities and entities, despite the decided lack of presence of any of these fantasy images in the daily life of those who believed in the legends. Hence, the legend of the myth must be preserved and in order to preserve the belief clearly no representation of the gods could invoke any criticism. Because of this, the visual imagery of the gods often wallowed in images of absolute perfection as a way of separating the gods from the common people.

In Caravaggio's world, the artist takes the opposite approach and in doing so the artist is consistent with the Renaissance approach to art which generally <https://assignbuster.com/the-humanization-of-gods-and-kings-in-renaissance-art/>

promoted a radical departure from classical art. To put it bluntly, classical art had long since become passe and was fairly boring and repetitive by the time the Renaissance occurred. The art world required a compelling new format and in *The Calling of St. Matthew* there is clearly evident a major departure from the classical art because religious figures are clearly demythicized and made far more human.

Hence, religion becomes more real because it is in the hands of the people and not in myths. When one looks at the image of St. Matthew in the painting, there is an interesting psychology present within the frame: it is clear that St. Matthew is an everyman. That is, he is not a mythic god or a hero born of the gods. He is a normal person who lives in the real world surrounded by real people. Hence, St. Matthew is far more believable and more credible a figure than a mythic legend. Furthermore, to be like St. Matthew is attainable.

For the average human to be like Hercules is impossible. However, to be like St. Matthew is attainable for all one needs to do is to turn one's back on vice and live a life of faith. In the painting, there is a clear representation of Matthew turning his back on the world of moneylending which is a life of vice. As such, to be like Matthew is attainable and this is an ideology that is thoroughly removed from the classical representation. This type of imagery is further seen in the neoclassical work of Jacques Louis David's *The Death of Marat*.

Jean Paul Marat was a hero of the French Revolution who gave up a very successful life as a scientist to join the "good fight." This would prove to be his undoing as he would later be assassinated. As such, Marat has become a

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symbol of selflessness and revolution in world imagery. What makes this painting interesting is the fact that there is a mix of humanizing and deifying the subject matter that while seemingly paradoxical on the surface is crafted into logical sense in the actual presentation within the painting.

In other words, Marat is pictured at the moment of his death and his death appears remarkably unremarkable. In other words, he does not die in a cinematic or melodramatic manner. He collapses and dies like any other human. While a hero and an individual who achieved in his life more than what any other person in the world may achieve, he returns to "normalcy" in death. In a way, the subtext here is that any person can be a hero if they so seek to achieve such heights and one does not need the mythic powers of the classical heroes in order to make a difference,

Additionally, Marat's death imagery is very derivative of the common images of Jesus Christ's death. Again, there is much subtext at work here as the similarity in the imagery would infer that Marat's sacrifice was Christ like and selfless. Furthermore, it would also infer that the ability to be like Christ is found within everyone and can be achieved if one dedicates his or her life to such Christ like values. This is a RADICAL departure from the unattainable heights the classical gods and heroes embody in the ancient myths of antiquity.

If there ever was a painting of the period that thoroughly lambasted the classical notion of gods and kings it would be Goya's Saturn Devouring One of His Own Sons. In the legend of Roman (Greek) myth, Saturn believed that his own sons would supplant his rule so he ate them. Now, this may seem morbid when reading the words, but there never was an image that  
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depicting such a description much less one that depicted Saturn in such an unflattering manner. There is good reason for this: in Ancient Rome one would have been tortured and put to death for such an unflattering image.

With Goya, the image is presented and it is presented in about as unflattering a manner that it could possibly be presented: Saturn is depicted as a homicidal, maniacal lunatic. The expression in his face is that of insanity and mania. He is depicted about as far from a god as possible and the ugliness of his actions is clear for the world to see. In a way, this painting provides the proverbial final nail in the coffin of the traditional image of gods and kings by essentially stripping away any veneer of anything positive.

The actions of the god are despicable and there is no attempt to put a positive spin on it. In a way, it would seem that those classic thinkers who repeated the tale of Saturn were nothing more than apologists for bad behavior and with his painting Goya essentially kills off the classical notion of what it was to be a god not by creating a false image, but by creating a realistic image. Bibliography Schneider, L. (2001) *Italian Renaissance Art*. New York: Westview Press. Snyder, J. (2004) *Northern Renaissance Art*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.